

# Consumer Socialization of Children: A Conceptual Framework

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**Abstract-** Children constitute a significant marketing zone. Today they not only make purchases for themselves but also influence family purchase decisions. The purchase behaviour is ruled by the way they have been socialized to act as consumers. This research looks at available literature with respect to children influence in family purchase decision. Media, family and peers are the key socializing agents that build in children the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to function in market place. This paper highlights the research done in last two decades on consumer socialization of children and identifies areas for future research with India as focus.

**Index Terms-** media, peers, purchase decisions, significant marketing zone, socialized

## I. INTRODUCTION

World has witnessed a tremendous change in past decades. India has been a part of these changes too. With modernization and urbanization, Indian consumer profile has under gone a change. Exposure to globalized world, rise in disposable incomes and changing family profile has given a big push to Indian consumerism and today Indian consumer is totally different from the Indian consumer in last two decades. Arrival of niche channels like Cartoon Network, Hungama and Tanami have contributed a lot in Kids power in India and today children have been recognized as a significant and different consumer market. There are three markets in one; the current market for their existing product desires, future market for all products and influential market where they influence their parents to spend on different products [1]. This segment becomes very important from an Indian perspective as 30% of our population is below the age of 15 years (Census, 2011). Hence proper understanding the consumer socialization of Indian children is important for the marketer who wants to reach out to this segment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer socialization as per Ward & Wackman, [2], as cited by Kaur & Singh, [3] “is the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning in the market place”. The process of consumer socialization starts in children while accompanying their parents to stores, malls etc [1]. In the beginning the children make requests for their preferred products, but as they grow older they start making their own choices in the store. At the age of five most of the children make purchases with the help of their parents and grandparents and by eight years they become independent consumers [1]. The socialization agents for children are family, peers and media in which the family sex role orientation, parental style and communication pattern have main

impact on children’s purchase behaviour [3].

## III. FAMILY AS A SOCIALIZATION AGENT

Family influences both directly and indirectly in consumer socialization and parents impart their individual values about consumption in their children in early childhood. Dotson & Hyatt, [4] revealed that parents act as main socializing agents until the child reaches adolescence. Children from single parent would prefer to go to shopping with his/ her parent where they would get a chance to acquire knowledge of shopping from their parents compared to children from dual income families [4]. Mothers act as main socializing agents in the early stages of child decision making particularly the negotiation stage, but their influence declines and become equal to other family members in the outcome stage [5].

Socialization of children is a function of parental style [6]. Differences in parental style reflect differences in shopping behaviour of children. Becker, [7], as cited by Carlson & Grossbart, [8] categorized parents based on style in to Rigid Controlling, Authoritarian, Organized Effective, Overprotective, Democratic, Indulgent, Anxious Neurotic, and Neglecting. Baumrind, [9] classified parents as—Authoritarian, Authoritative, and Permissive. Macoby & Martin, [10] integrated these two approaches so as to generalise the parental classification to all families. They revealed that parental style is a function of two dimensions like responsiveness and demandingness, and thus classified parents in to Indulgent, Authoritative, Authoritarian, and Neglecting. Grossbart & Stuenkel, [11] publicized that parental style provides the main basis for explaining the differences among parents regarding how they socialize their children and incorporate the consumer knowledge and skills in them.

Childers & Rao, [12] studied the family influence on children with respect to different products and discovered that family influence will be more for privately consumed luxury and necessity (mattresses), but will be less for publically consumed luxury (golf clubs) and necessity (wrist watches) and children learn price sensitiveness and brand loyalty behaviours from their parents. Moschis, [13] revealed that parents regulate the amount of exposure of children to several information sources like television, peers and salesperson. Children learn shopping behaviour from their parents and replicate it. Changes in the parental style explains the differences with respect to the way parents try to control children’s behaviour with power, sentiments at the time of socializing them [3]

Amongst the family members, mothers have been found as main socializing agents [14], however mothers varying in parental style were seen to vary in communication patterns with children regarding consumption patterns. Socialization of children was also seen to differ with the economic and social

status of mother [15]. It was also seen that children from professionally involved mothers had more exposure to shopping than the children from part time or unemployed mothers. Flouri, [16] studied the impact of maternal communication style on children socialization and revealed that mother's communication style alone was a reliable predictor style of child's level of materialism, though father's role has been found to be very restricted in consumer socialization of children [17,18].

Family influence in consumer socialization of children was studied by Robertson and Rossiter, [19] and found that social status of family also had a role in consumer socialization of children. Children from well-educated families were able to perceive persuasive intent in ads very easily. Moschis & Churchill, [20] found that children from families with higher socio economic set up were found to socialize faster. Female children were perceived to communicate overtly with their parents, while male children had more probability of receiving a negative reinforcement. Mothers were found to be socially oriented towards daughters than sons [21], also intergenerational influence was found to be mainly from mothers to daughters [22]. Studies of Yossi et al. [23] revealed that girls preferred shopping with their parents.

Studies on family as a socializing agent for children in India are limited. According to Hammer & Tunner, [24], American parents follow authoritative parental style and frequently allowed their children in choice making. However authoritative parental style had mixed effect on Indian children [25]. Roopnarine & Hossain, [26] publicized that joint family system have been a major influence on socialization of children in India. Ross, [27]; Kakar, [28] studied that mother in the family is main nurturer and caregiver while as father (grandfather if living) is dominant and children obeyed with respect and fear. Dasgupta, [29] identified that Indian parents place more emphasis on academic achievement and family inter dependence, discourage children autonomy and stresses on importance of extended family with respect and obedience of elders. However the studies of Ronald, [30]; Roopnarine & Hossain, [26] stated that parents in India prepare their children from earlier years for their eventual adult roles, in which males traditionally stay with their parents and look after the entire family, while as females support their spouses and look after household and children in family.

According to a report by McKinsey, (2007), India is expected to be the fifth largest consumer market by 2025. Indian culture has undergone much more social and economic change in last two decades than any country [31]. Also there has been a shift in the society from joint family setup to nuclear family and rise in parental income. All this has contributed a lot in kid's power. Twenty years ago one could safely say that decision making will be dominated by parents, today the role of children cannot be ignored.

#### IV. PEER GROUP AS A SOCIALIZATION AGENT

Peer group is defined as a group whose values and attitudes are used by a person as a foundation of his or her present behaviour [32, 33] and peer group influence is defined as the amount to which peers exert influence on the assertiveness, feelings and behaviour of a person [34]. Peers offer a distinctive background within which children develops social skills and cognitive talent [35]. Peer influence is more in early adolescence (14 yrs.) but

progressively decreases as child approaches late adolescence [36] as cited by Mangleburg, [34]. Moreover Peers play a significant role in imparting the knowledge of style, brand, consumption pattern etc. to the children [20].

Childres & Rao, [12] studied the impact of peer group influence on children for some products and found that peer influence was high for public products than private products. Peers groups also support children in their purchases or consumption decisions and help them to establish a separate identity quite different from their parents [37]. Studies like Brittain, [38] also revealed the same findings that children spend more time with peers for day to day decision and spend time with their parents for value based, long term and ethical decision.

Studies on peer group as a socializing agent for children in India are limited. However certain studies stated that Indian children are generally influenced by peer group and workmates and as the child grows through life, the influence of peer groups raises and reaches its peak during a child's teenage years. Extensive research in this regard showed that children who were more closely associated with their parents and peers performed better than those who received support from only one or neither. Gwen et al. [39] stated that the major success to Pepsi was through peer pressure in selecting their purchase choice.

#### V. MEDIA AS A SOCIALIZATION AGENT

Media is one of the socializing agents that affect the children throughout the development [20]. Studies on the impact of advertising on children focuses on three types of effects; Cognitive, affective and behavioural [19]. Studies on cognitive effect discussed the children's skills to discriminate between a commercial and a television programme and their ability to comprehend the intent of advertising [40]. Most of these studies have used Piaget's model (1965) of cognitive development. Children at Piaget's preoperational stage (2-7 yrs.) respond to commercials in a different way than do children at concrete operational stage (7-12 yrs.). Children in the concrete operational stage are mature enough to distinguish between a television commercial and a normal television programme. Studies on affective effects reveal that children's response to commercials gradually decreases as they proceed to concrete operational stage [2, 40]. Studies on behavioural effects discuss the extent to which children get persuaded by the commercials and are measured by the requests children are making for the purchase of products while shopping with their parents [41].

It is worrying that children are spectators of advertisements primarily because young children are open to thousands of commercials in India [42, 43]. Marketers are using television as a key source for advertisements as it affords access to children at much earlier age than other sources of advertisements can achieve largely because textual learning development does not happen until many years after children get converted to regular television viewers [3]. Although, advertisements have turned to be a main determinant of children's consumer behaviour but other factors have also been found to influence children's purchase requests [40]. Gender has been found to influence the children's purchase requests for advertised products; boys are more persistent than girls in their purchase requests [2, 40]. The other factors that have been found to influence children's consumer behaviour are socioeconomic status of the family,

parent-child interactions and peer group influence. These factors may not only affect children's consumer behaviour but may also enhance or inhibit cognitive, affective and behavioural effects of advertising [44].

It has been seen that children in their earlier stages of television viewing do not differentiate between a commercial and a programme. Most children below the age of 4-5 years are not aware about the concept of commercials and below the age of 7-8 years do not properly understand the persuasive intent of ads and tend to be egocentric [2]. Carroll, [45] in a study on children found that the most common persuasive strategy used in advertising is to associate product with fun and happiness, rather than giving any product rated information. Hence children in the age group of 8-10 years grow a positive attitude towards advertisements. Understanding of tactics and appeals develop only in early adolescence and thereafter [46]. Children even in young adolescence display doubtful predispositions towards advertising and as the children steps in to adolescence, they gain more knowledge about the different tactics used by marketers and hence become sceptical of advertising [46]. Moschis & Churchill, [20] also revealed the same results that in late adolescence children tend to be mature and develop resistance to persuasive intent of advertising.

Chan, [47] found a positive relationship between attentions paid to advertisements and perceived truthfulness and concluded that children who perceived advertisements to be true pay more attention than those who do not. Mizerski, [48] found that children even in young age recognised adult oriented products. Galst & White, [41] studied the effect of commercials on children and found that there is no effect of such exposures but that it is mainly a function of the product category advertised. Study of Mallalieu et al. [49] concluded that children born in 1990 appear to have much developed cognitive skills and differentiated commercials from programs and understood the intent of advertising to a for greater extent that those children reported by earlier studies.

Studies on children's recall of commercials has been examined from various angles and it has been seen that half of the children studied tendered to remember ads for products such as toys, cereals and ice creams [50]. Resnik & Sern, [51]; Gorn & Gibson, [52] exposed that brand preferences can also be manipulated by even a single exposure to a commercial and improved preference for advertised brands over other rival brands are also an outcome of frequent exposure [53].

Studies of Ross et al. [27] showed that certain advertising tactics like inclusion of certain characters and celebrities are essential in shaping children's views for advertised products. Exposure to identical version of ads one with a celebrity endorser and one without a celebrity endorser revealed that children preferred products with celebrity endorser. Study of Atkin, [54] discovered that premium offers are also important in shaping children's consumer behaviour and found in his study that children in a supermarket made more requests for cereals because they were influenced by premium offers. One more study done in this regard indicated that commercials offering premiums remained additionally persuasive than commercials containing a popular programme character [55].

Study of Atkin, [54] also revealed that television watching was a key predictor of children's requests for various products in the

supermarkets. Such types of studies in other countries revealed same results. Buijzen & Valkenburg, [56] conducted a research on Dutch children and stated that children purchase requests were directly related to television viewing. Moreover cross cultural studies comparing children from Japan, United States and England revealed a positive relationship between children demands for merchandise advertised on television, though such type of purchase requests were seen more in United [57].

With the advancement in new media, new innovative commercial practices are now being directed to children. Marketers are now using internet as 48% of 8-18 year old are linked to internet access, 40% of 2-7 year used to be on line and 19% of 8-13 years reported visiting a website on the previous day [58]. Thousands of children oriented websites have come in to existence and many are laden with commercial promotions Montgomery, [59] stated that one of the distinctive features of marketing to children on internet is that the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial content are blurred if not absent entirely.

Studies on media as a socializing agent for children in India are limited. Singh, [60]; George, [42] stated that children in India watch television and prefer it to reading. Dhiman, [61] stated that children in India have become more judicious due to repeated exposure to different television commercials. They possess more knowledge about the different products than their parents and play a crucial role in brand identification and brand purchase decisions. Bandyopadhyay, [62] also showed that children are important audience who watch different television commercial and resulted in the demand for advertised products. Kapoor & Verma, [63] in a comprehensive study in Delhi investigated the children's understanding of television advertising and stated that children as young as six years could understand the purpose of television ads and can easily distinguish a commercial from a programme. With increase in age of the children, cognitive understanding of the advertisements increased and children have turned to respond to different ads in a mature way [3]. Dudani et al. [64] in a study revealed that 99% of parents perceived that television watching was too high and children carried that influence for a long time with 45% parents agreed that advertising was a major tool which influenced the opinion building process of their children. However both parents and children noted the power of TV ads on children purchase requests and how it shaped children's consumer behaviour.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study are very interesting and throw light on the importance of family, peer group factor and mass media that build in children the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to function in market place and have an overwhelming impact on their brand choice and consumption behaviour. There is doubt that children are passionate consumers and have become socialized into this role from an early age. Throughout childhood, children develop the knowledge, skills and values they will use in making and influencing purchases now and in the future. Today Children have taken an important place in the society than their parents ever had. They not only are consumers but have a considerable influence may it be direct or indirect influence in the family purchase decisions. The amount of influence exerted by children differs from product group and the

time of decision making process. For some products they are active purchasers while as in others products, they are influencers and they direct the purchase through their parents by "Kidfluence". The purchase behaviour is ruled by the way they have been socialized to act as consumers [3].

India is also witnessing a rise in the number of children influencing the family's decision-making about major purchases. Though India has a diverse culture, elder people are given respect in Indian culture and their say is always valued [65], still a shift in Indian culture in terms of rise in nuclear families and dual earning couples, increase in divorce rates, increase in single parent households, delayed parenthood, hyper parenting, rise in children channels etc. have contributed a lot on children's influence in family decision making [66]. Today we see especially in rural areas panchayats (children's committees) are being set up and the fact that kids are often the only literate members of a family in villages adds up to the fact that 'pester power' is growing everywhere.

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